



# The District Advisor

*Captain James F. Ray, United States Army*

*In late 1964 Captain James F. Ray, United States Army, Subsector Advisor, Nha Be District in Gia Dinh Province, South Vietnam, prepared a report which was a distillate of his five months' experience and of his approach to solving the key problems which he had encountered in his particular area.*

*On 12 January 1965 Major General Richard G. Stilwell, United States Army, then Chief of Staff, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, circulated Captain Ray's report throughout US elements in South Vietnam. In a covering letter, General Stilwell pointed out that while some of Captain Ray's conclusions and meth-*

*ods were transferable, others were not. General Stilwell wrote:*

*"The real value of this brief report lies in its perceptiveness—as witness the final paragraph. For Captain Ray was a singularly perceptive and dedicated soldier. His successive superb records—at the Military Academy, at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar, and in initial troop assignments—were those of one headed for the very top of the profession of arms."*

*Just three days before, on 9 January 1965, Captain Ray had been killed in action while accompanying his counterpart on a night reconnaissance patrol.—Editor.*

**A**NY attempt to discuss the position of the advisor to a district chief in Vietnam must perforce take account of the variety of the job as among the heterogeneous collection of districts which comprise the nation. Perhaps no other advisory role is so conditioned by the local situation which, indeed, together with the personality of the district chief himself, determines the limits within which the advisor functions.

Thus, in those areas where Viet Cong control is extensive and government suzerainty limited, one is strictly (as the terms of reference imply) a subsector advisor, a military advisor. But in others, where the military situation is more under control and the sphere of governmental involvement is accordingly broader, the scope of advisory activity opens to embrace not only security in the strict sense, but also the entire spectrum of public welfare and administration.

This paper, which attempts no more than a synthesis of my own experiences, is, therefore, a reflection only of conditions in Nha Be District, and may afford slim basis for generalization.

### agrarian district

Nha Be is one of the six districts of Gia Dinh, and lies at the hub of the Hop Tac area. It has a population of some 55,000 in an area of roughly 100 square kilometers of paddy land. Although contiguous with Saigon on its northern border, it is almost entirely agrarian. Over 90 percent of its work force is engaged in growing rice (of which, for water reasons, it gets but one crop annually). Roughly one-quarter of the district's 34 hamlets are completely pacified, and the government is in effective military control of the remainder.

One Regional Force company is under the operational control of the subsector commander, who also directs the activities of

over 400 Popular Forces. These troops establish ambushes each night and conduct small (two or three-platoon) operations virtually every day. Thus, the entire district is covered once every two or three weeks, and, in consequence, there are no permanent Viet Cong bases within our limits.

Viet Cong activity is confined to terrorism by indigenous guerrillas and raids, typically of squad size, by units based near the district's borders. Roads are, in general, not safe at night; during daylight one can, with a small bodyguard, enjoy freedom of the district.

### security problem

The major security problem derives from the presence in the district of a tank farm in which is stored petroleum, oils, and lubricants stock. A critical sector, Yeu Khu Nha Be, has been created which includes parts of Nha Be and Nhan Trac (Bien Hoa) Districts, and three Regional Force companies are under the operational control of the critical sector commander for the defense of the installation.

The Nha Be district advisor is additionally charged with overseeing the tank farm defenses. I, therefore, work with two counterparts. Since the problems of securing the tank farm can neither logically nor pragmatically be separated from those of defending the district, coordination of efforts between these two counterparts is a major focus of advisory effort.

Perhaps the nature of the job can best be described through an investigation of how the advisor's time is spent. I have averaged nearly three hours daily with the district chief. In one sense, this is inadequate—it would have been far better if the two of us could have spent more time together outside the office, visiting hamlets and supervising the activities of pacification

cadre, as well as conducting operations.

But the fact is that this district chief tied himself to his desk, in spite of strong advisory pressure to do some field supervision, and, under such circumstances, he had a limited capacity for absorbing advice. Of the many hours so spent, perhaps a fourth were concerned with matters of military security; the bulk of the remainder was addressed primarily to pacification problems and the administration of United States Operations Mission (USOM) projects.

#### **de facto agent**

In this regard, I have, in my dealings with the district chief, served as a *de facto* agent of USOM, alike in the drafting of projects, followup on the approval process, and supervision of their execution. Indeed, such matters have, in terms of time, formed by far the largest part of my job.

Additionally, my assistant and I have averaged two to three hours daily with subordinate district officials. Most military matters have been coordinated through the commander of the subsector's Regional Force company, who acts as the deputy for security (although this position has not been formalized). One or more members of the advisory team accompany him on military operations whenever practicable. The subjects of advisory effort with him are essentially identical with the area of interest to advisors of any tactical unit.

Second, we have spent a great deal of time working with the aspirant who directs the Hamlet Pacification Service. In his case, advice has amounted virtually to complete training in the responsibilities and techniques of his job. It has been through him, rather than the district chief, that the critical problem of translating reports, submitted by pacification cadre, into goods and services for the people has been directed.

Third, we have worked in some detail with the district police chief—mainly in an attempt to influence his allocation of the manpower resources at his disposal, especially in the direction of increased emphasis on a program of population and resources control measures.

Finally, we have stayed in close contact with the subsector staff. Here, we have experienced some success in improving the functioning of the operations center, regularizing logistical procedures, and, perhaps most important, infusing the notion of staff coordination (even, on occasion, cooperation).

#### **staff functions**

Indeed, I have taken as a major objective of this team's efforts the initiation of proper staff functioning with mission-type orders, intrastaff liaison, and the presentation of coordinated plans—the overambitiousness of which goal may be only too obvious to those having experience with the Vietnamese system of personal rule. Nonetheless, the degree of inexperience of subordinate district and subsector officials is the greatest obstacle in the path toward a viable, properly functioning arm of government at this echelon (with, perhaps, the exception of the obstacle posed by those who have too much experience). It may well be that over the long run the greatest contribution that our advisory effort makes at the district level will be in terms of the training of this new generation of officials.

Advisory work with the district chief and his staff has been accomplished almost exclusively by the team's two officers. I have not carved out special areas of interest reserved exclusively for one or the other of us—rather, we have shared participation in all facets of the work.

The one specialized member of the team is the medical advisor, the extent of whose activities merits consideration in detail. Essentially, he has served as advisor to the District Health chief who has proved to be an exceptionally receptive counterpart. The medical advisor has averaged more than six hours a day with this man. Jointly, they have firmed hamlet sick call hours, corrected medical supply procedures, improved treatment records, and generally raised the standard of treatment and the number of patients seen daily. Also, the medical advisor has worked quite closely with USOM Public Health Division officials, most of whom have expressed surprise and pleasure at finding someone with his technical credentials permanently based in the district. Through them he has been able to obtain substantial material benefits for the district's medical program.

### refute doubts

The medical advisor would seem to have refuted the doubts which USOM is alleged to have voiced concerning his position. He has also worked as a military medic—for example, medical teams have, for the first time, begun visiting paramilitary dependent housing. He has organized training in the elements of first aid for selected Popular Force members, and has caused to be initiated supply procedures to obtain basic essential first aid supplies for each separate Popular Force unit.

Independently of his counterpart, the medical advisor has also performed treatment using US medical supplies, although certainly not on a routine basis. First, he has performed routine first aid for personnel living in the same compound with our team. Second, he has consistently been the first medic to arrive and administer emergency treatment when friendly forces have

been wounded. He has probably done more than any other member of our team, both to create good will among the people for the United States and to enhance among the people the notion that their government is, indeed, for the people.

### some success

The team's operations sergeant, initially, was able to do little advisory work, most of his time being involved in the administrative and logistical support of our team, but he is now becoming quite active, as a training advisor. Recently, we have enjoyed some success with the notion of training as a continuing requirement. Many of the operational weaknesses of the Regional and Popular Forces—most notable, the deplorable standard of marksmanship proficiency—can be corrected by training at the unit level. However, their most serious deficiency, the weakness of subordinate leaders, is rather beyond our capability for formal training. We are working out a modified Army Training Program built largely around individual and squad proficiencies for gradual presentation to these units.

The Regional Force companies defending the tank farm began training in December. The operations sergeant has been given the mission of acting as a kind of training sergeant to oversee the implementation of plans worked out between the commander and the senior advisor and, where appropriate, to assist in obtaining training aids or in presenting classes. Finally, he typically accompanies one of the maneuver elements on as many operations as practicable.

Having considered the nature of our work as it has evolved over a period of some four months, it is appropriate to examine some of the difficulties we have encountered.

The first of these is the language prob-

lem, although in this regard we have been particularly fortunate. I am able to communicate with both my counterparts in (a kind of) French; we have for some time had an interpreter which enables us to split our advisory effort; and the District Health Chief speaks a rudimentary English that suffices for routine purposes; therefore, we are able simultaneously to function in three separate directions.

### language training

This is largely fortuitous. Probably a greater percentage of people at the district level do not speak English than at any other echelon in which we have advisors. The raw fact is that there can be no more advisors than there are people able to communicate. More than this, a district advisory team is constantly thrown into contact with "the common man"—hamlet chiefs, patients on sick call, policemen at checkpoints—with whom even a basic Vietnamese capability counts for a great deal. I consider it almost imperative to the success of the district advisory effort that as many district team members as possible get three months of language training, and that persons having this background receive priority in assignment to district teams. All our team members are currently studying the language, but in terms of available time it is decidedly a second-best solution.

Second, there is an inexorable urge to try to command through US advisory channels—a tendency noticeable at virtually all US echelons, however sincere their desire to resist it. It arises from a very proper desire to correct a myriad of deficiencies, and is nurtured by our system of inspections and reports. However laudable the motives which sustain it, it has to be resisted; whatever advantages it might yield in the short run would be more than offset

by the more permanent harmful effects. We must be prepared to tolerate a certain level of inefficiency in the name of a larger goal: training the new generation to run the nation.

The third problem is one familiar to all advisors in whatever capacity, and follows from a tradition of centralized powers and personal rule. These have resulted in a lack of staff initiative and both introduce totally unnecessary delays and unresponsiveness into the system. They also have most unfortunate consequences whenever there is a power vacuum. I have unhappily experienced the replacement of a district chief—regrettable, essentially, because the manner of its execution left the district without an effectively functioning leader for nearly a month, a month characterized chiefly by marking time, if not actual regression.

### logistical role

A fourth difficulty is a tendency on the part of some Vietnamese—although, fortunately, neither of the two commanders—to consider the advisor as a combination genie and supply officer. This we have had some success in countering, largely through a stubborn insistence on making the Vietnamese system work. Some officials are still wont to think that requisitions are to be submitted to the advisor; we, therefore, have been at some pains to stress that our logistical role begins when someone in their system either delays or says "No."

From discussions with other district advisors one gathers that many have experienced difficulties with their own house-keeping, although most of these appear to be the one-time function of initially getting organized. Since ours was, I believe, the first to be fully manned and equipped in the field, these transitional problems have

by now been resolved, and our propinquity to Saigon makes it easy to solve such problems as arise. It would be most advantageous to have a second jeep, and we are less than convinced that a GRC-87 is the answer to the district team's communication problems, although one can appreciate why teams are currently equipped as they are.

We have distilled certain conclusions from our experiences thus far which I would like to posit in the form of suggestions to be considered. The first concerns specialized training to be given district advisory personnel. Language training seems the single most important prerequisite for success; the foundation in the language given in a 12-week course would be indispensable. Most of the other background material needed could be woven into the fabric of the language course, and would ideally be presented using the case study method almost exclusively.

Second, I feel that the medical advisor should be accorded greater latitude—by

which I mean extending him supplies of medicine commensurate with his state of training for his own use in treating Vietnamese, not as a competitor with their own supply system. He should also be given a freer hand to participate, along with the District Health Chief, in providing proper outpatient medical care to the rural population. This, I think, would have a significant impact on what district teams can do to win support for the United States among the people of Vietnam.

In conclusion, I think there could be no finer job in Vietnam, in terms of the background one acquires in what President Johnson has called "the stubborn realities of the pursuit of peace." The district advisory team is directly involved in three of our most pressing international problems: the delicacies of dealing with allies who desire our support while resenting any hint of interference; the grassroots administration of foreign aid (in terms of ensuring that our aid gets to the people who need it); and the military confrontation of Communist revolutionary warfare.